

The Harbor

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A collection of short stories

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دار الكتب والمعارف العامة

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Dedication

To the body whose shadow is the only thing left to see.

Between words and silence,
Lies an isthmus where mind is entombed,
Along with everything else.

Mohammad Bin Abduljabir Al Nafry (965 G)

Another Head

I groped for my head, it was still there.
I rubbed my eye, and my hand came across a tender mass.

My head was twisted like a pear, so heavy it could not bear its own weight.

A headache feasted upon its back and a frigid shadow of death crept into its fore.

A snore hurled near me!

I thought it a mere dream or an illusion, but a foul-smelling breath harassed my nose, as the snore hurled again, much closer this time.

I looked to my side and saw a head lying next to me! It was “dangling” over my shoulder, glued to my head with shut eyes like a baby ravaged by fever.

I could not believe my eyes!

A new neck, mouth and teeth, eyes and ears. A whole new head has grown on me!

I sprung out of my place in terror, awaking the head.

“Good morning!” his lips spoke with a voice rather similar to mine, prompting me to realize that this is not a dream.

“May I have a glass of water, please?” the head requested.

“How did you steal my body? Who are you?’ I shouted in disbelief.

“Nonsense! This body has become our mutual property now. We share the same fate, the same life, and the same death. In short, we are one!”

I didn’t go to work.

Instead, I mantled myself with silence all day, gazing in terror my other head that grew out of the blue. It must be a conspiracy against my body! One that has been woven to ruin me and take over everything I’ve made for myself.

My body was slow and unruly, even moving my hand had to be done in agreement with the other head. We had to think together and at the same time.

“May I move my hand?” I asked

“You mean *our* hand!” the head said, laughing his brains out while ignoring my ire.

The phone started to ring, so I tried to pick up, but a set of sharp teeth violated my wrest.

“Beware! You have trespassed on my territory. North is yours, south is mine. West is yours, east is mine. Don’t you yet understand what’s happening?”

The other head went on detailing this new “sharing” situation. He stated that he has neither feelings nor sympathy, and when I politely asked for an elaboration, he thrashed me with a disapproving gaze.

“Are you dim-witted?” the head shouted, “Left is yours and right is mine. The heart is yours, enjoy it! I am heartless, no heart for the right.”

Alone will I weep and suffer the harsh agony of loneliness, while my *partner* lie atop my shoulder, happy with this *zoning* game.

I attempted to negotiate a different solution for this partnership, but he bluntly refused, claiming that he is comfortable with the status quo.

I begged and begged, but for no avail, for he was stone-cold!

In my frustration and anger, I threatened to crash the head at the first opportunity, but he laughed himself to tears.

“Didn’t I just tell you you’re so dim-witted?” He mocked, “If I were to die, it will only be a matter of seconds before you join me. It’ll be our joint suicide!”

Meanwhile, a mosquito started hovering over his nose. I needed every bit of patience in me to maintain my balance and sanity, and to ignore its nettlesome buzzing breaking the silence. Finally, the mosquito landed on my head, then flew again to settle on a bottle of pills beside me.

The other head peered into my thoughts, before looking in horror at the bottle of pills on the tabletop.

“No, you are not thinking of that!” he said with terrified eyes.

But I didn’t spare a second and swiftly grabbed the bottle, and swallowed all the pills at a single gulp.

Heavy darkness crept slowly into my eyes disregarding my partner’s resistance. A sweet numbness cast its weight on my right side as I watched it slowly submit and wilt.

A gripping sensation of lightness overwhelmed me, ecstasy filled me. Soon after, my partner’s voice was engulfed by the silence.

Only the buzzing of the mosquito remained, strolling above two lifeless heads.

Sands

The wind howled, then the flowers wilted and dried, but only when the birds relinquished the skies did the people mind the matter.

They felt deceived and realized that a calamity has befallen the country.

They listened for the sound of streams, but heard nothing, no bulbuls chirping in the sky and no water flowing on the ground

Nothing but the wind could be heard; wailing a dark eulogy.

They panicked when trees tumbled down at noontide.

A man dusted his shoulders and stood up almost tripping over the soft, slippery sand.

“O leader!” The man addressed the leader while leaning on a dune of sand, “Sand has covered our hearts and doomed our city. We’ve nothing left but the desert.”

“Woe unto us!” another exclaimed, “With every sunrise we grow thirstier, every gust of wind fills our mouths with sand. What have you done to this country?”

The people pricked up their ears again, but the howl of the sand was the only sound they could hear, echoing louder and louder in their ears and hearts.

All eyes gazed at the white-bearded sheikh.

They gathered round the inspired hero, the guardian, and keeper of their home.

He was standing tall amidst them, taller than all, mantled in a green silky garment and topped with a dashing round hat – gifts from the dear allies.

He took refuge in silence and in a pale smile hiding behind his features.

The people gathered their hands in a warm applause, women cheered loud and high, children exclaimed in joy, and the youth giggled in sheer ecstasy, all shouting “Hail the leader!”

“My people, our country is fine.” The leader declared as soon as the people settled.

Another wave of cheers and applause took over the scene. Women ululated loudly and the people cheered: “Long live the leader!”

“Starting now, our allies will bring us prosperity and love.” He shouted as the people cheered even louder. “My generous people! We

will trade our greens with our allies. We need change at this stage. This alliance will bring so much good to the both of us."

With these words and an awing gaze from the white sheikh, the people lowered their spears and knew that the sheikh will live long.

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Sand was imported. The cost of transporting it was so high.

After a few days, barbered wires surrounded the reserve, which was bedighted with ribbons and flags of the allies, all ready for the grand opening that the leader and the upper class attended.

The ribbon was cut in a wave of applause. Leaders exchanged medals and kisses, and took pictures while signing agreements and treaties.

Subsequently, the reserve became a resort for the people. They carried beverages and candy bags, and head to the reserve in joy and enthusiasm.

Kids built sand castles then destroyed them to build them again, men rested their bodies on the imported sands and praised the wit of their leader, and women wore bikinis that showed their white silky legs and thighs.

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Temperatures rose to record levels.

Water was mixed with salt, polluted with a weird taste. At the beginning, everybody ignored the issue. Many claimed it's the onset of the change of which the leader spoke. They even started making jokes about the taste, and gifts each other salt water in colorful packaging.

After a short while, the salty aftertaste became unbearable.

The sheikh put on a new hat and addressed the people.

"The allies have an alternative plan for us." He announced to his people who circled around him with pale faces bleached by the sun.

Silence reigned over the scene as everyone knew that they are steadily heading into the unknown.

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The sky is yellow.

The bed of sand ravages, devouring every remnants of green. Khamasin is choking the land and blazing the air with salty scorching sands.

People do not whine. They have blind faith that their leader is mindful of the situation, and is always ready with an answer to all their questions.

Sand roams the streets, grinding the footpaths into ruins and rubble.

Shops, pillars, and even schools are falling apart, replaced by the sand.

Only road signs and signboards are still in place, standing cold and dead, holding colorful pictures of the exalted leader, showing him smiling and waving to his people as he always do, all while the city slowly falls apart.

The Hand

He dusted his hand.

It was looking off and ill, pale with brown spots, like a mangy animal. He examined it closely, caressed it with his other hand, hoping that all of this would turn out to be some sort of a twisted dream, but the blisters have taken over his five fingers, wrest, elbow, and crawled up to his shoulder.

His hand dangled by his side like a dry tree, broken by a raging tornado.

This is his right hand, the one he had always counted on. It had been his rock and support. “What curse has befallen this hand?” he screamed to himself and wished he could cry.

He tried to sleep, but as soon as he rested on his left side, a sharp numbness disturbed his peace, and a cramp down his neck forced him to turn to the right side. However, lying on his right side sent a sting of paralysis creeping to the rest of his body, freezing it whole.

He looked at his hand and contemplated.

It’s fully and utterly brown now from the tips of the fingers to his wrest. He tried to move it but it fell like a lifeless tin plate. A putrid stench harassed his nose whenever he tried to come near it. The hand reeked of rust, and let a wet odor that reminded him of moldy fish.

For the first time ever, he actually hates his right hand. The brown color has polluted the right side of his body and spread to stain the white sheets around him.

He stood up and headed towards the sink in an attempt to wash clean his rusty hand, holding it under his armpit like a baby.

The right hand… the story of long and weary struggles. The hand with which he oppressed his enemies and crushed their necks; with which he fought all intruders and defended against their evil.

“Your hand is of no use now,” the fortune teller whispered. “Beware of enemies and water! Don’t awaken the other hands around you. Don’t let them know of the affliction. One word can expose you, so hold your secret within and cut the rusty hand off before it destroys your heart. Know that there is no cure without amputation, and salvation can only come once you’ve gotten rid of this hand!”

Hearing about water and enemies frightened him, and made him regret sharing his secret with the fortune teller.

“Rust will gorge upon your entire body,” The fortune teller added, sharing one last warning, “It will most certainly reach your heart, then your head, then you will fall… You will fall!”

The word *fall* echoed in his head as he paid the fortune teller for her last insight.

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The right hand was a little bird sleeping over his thighs; thin, pale, and stained in death and mourning. He moved his leg and felt the weight of the hand. That’s when he made up his mind.

“Cut off the right and gain the favor of the left,” He thought to himself, “then all this ordeal will end, exactly as the fortune teller predicted.” He added with a smile.

He came down on it with all his strength, and struck right on its joint. The rusty flesh spattered his eyes and bleeding heart. The right hand quivered under the strikes of the knife, an ally taken down by the conspiracy and treason of the left hand.

The hand dangled like a swing barely attached to the rest of the arm. He struck one more time and was met with a steely echo and rattly cries of a painful death.

He hit one last time and the right hand finally fell down to the ground, a stranger to his body. He laughed amuck in what sounded more like crying, while waiting for the blood to flow out, but the blood has turned to rust.

He threw the knife aside and felt an eerie numbness in the left hand, and as he turned to looked at it, he saw it covered with familiar brown blisters; thin, and stained in death and mourning.

Paradise

Only one chair, that is paradise!

Give me and I will give back, deprive me and I will deprive you back, I'll even take your chair.

It's a trap, and whoever gets stuck will fall into the dream.

The Dream is half the truth, and the other half is the rumination of delusion and superstition.

I turned back towards the chair, it was distant and my vision was blurry. The eyes of the other chairs are traps masticating my newborn dreams.

"You have won the chair!" The voice said in a silky and clear tone.

Her feminine voice rose gradually accompanied by a scary huskiness devoid of love and compassion.

When life lets you down, nothing helps you like laughter. It lifts your soul far above these chairs and the promised paradise.

I tried to laugh whenever I had a chance, but my mouth was gagged.

"Damn it! Where is my mouth?" I wondered with a teardrop running down my cheek. "I should have never spoken!" I added

"The chair is the paradise of grace!" The voice exclaimed, "All blessed ones, please be seated and wear your seatbelts."

I sat on the chair, it was one of these chairs I hated; the back was too straight for me to relax or feel comfortable. It was also equipped with thick belts like those you can find in fighter jets.

In less than a minute, I was fastened to the chair with my chin dangling on my chest, and both my hands were bound beside me, and my feet were slipping on a cloud-like surface.

I immediately panicked and felt a cold chill throughout my body, so intense and cold it almost froze my heart. I truly wanted to cry, but no matter how hard I tried to squeeze a tear out, nothing would come out. My tears refused to leave their home.

"What is happening to me? I cannot shut my eyes nor open my mouth!" I cried.

"Blessed one! The control panel on your chair is right before you. Please do not look down." The voice instructed.

I do not know what made me look down despite the warning, but as soon as I did, my chair convulsed so hard I almost puked.

I leaned back on the chair once again to rectify the situation, but that triggered the voice once again.

"Please do not look down! You will lose points for every time you look down starting now."

"Points!? God, I hate math."

All the other chairs appeared before me mounted by their owners like a train awaiting departure. I could not see their faces clearly, for the air was fogged with dark hues. Hellish hot wind surrounded my body and prevented me from breathing well.

I wonder what does this female has in store for me with her unending instructions.

I felt a huge conspiracy being plotted against me and that my entire life is cursed into the unknown.

I did not meet anyone since I stepped into my tomb.

The day of my death was a perfect day. Vision of that day are still stuck in my head although they're miniature to the point where I cannot decipher them.

I clearly remember my father's pale face. He looked down at me one last time as if he was admonishing me.

"Farewell!" he said before starting to sob.

My brothers handled my pale body and rested me in my grave.

Oh how Fate had rushed my death and gave me no warning!

My body bent over this chair is slowly getting numb and paralyzed. The numbness is creeping up from my back trying to reach my head. However, I am already dead! So if my body gets paralyzed, what's next?

Pain has a different taste here. It reaches the peak then descends on its own. I again felt a need to puke and that my bowel is involuntarily connected to everything going on in my head.

I shook my head hard in an attempt to lose these thoughts, but a huge weight nested upon my chest, a burden much like my father's last look when he bed me farewell.

The chair was topped with oddly shaped tentacles, which suddenly balled and covered the back of my head sealing it like a cocoon and wrapping it warmly with soft and thin threads.

I could no longer feel my body.

The sting that used to bother me disappeared, and instead I was overwhelmed with a sense of tranquility and lightness I had never felt before. The burden that weighed upon my chest tumbled down to the bottom of the chair, where I saw it lying like a dirty rat in a narrow dark corner.

My memory became clear like a film rolling before my eyes. My finger reached up slowly to feel the features of my face, my mouth was back how it was, and so did my eyes and my body.

Now, I have a new body!

I was overwhelmed by a beautiful sensation that made me wonder: "Am I truly in heaven?"

My heartbeats accelerated in a strange pace. I suddenly remembered that I have not eaten for a very long time although I had totally forgotten about food since I arrived here.

Suddenly, the rat climbed up the chair again and nested like a crow upon my chest, snatching the newborn happiness of the cocoon up my head.

"The dream is over! You have exhausted your credit point." with these words the voice stabbed my paradise.

It seems this is a mere dream? It can be long or short depending on my credit points.

"Well then". I told myself

I waited for the female's voice impatiently! I will yell at here and rebuke her for this cheap dream conspiracy, a dream that started just to end like a spark.

I did not wait long, 'O blessed one!' she muttered.

I tried to spit, but my dream did not end. I kicked the chair in wrath but I did not wake up, I struggled to break my chains with all my force, but the rat remained put. I cried at the top of my lungs, yet my cries were imprisoned within my melted mouth.

I wept and the tears descended bitter and galore.

I do not want paradise. I do not want paradise!

I do not want it.

The Harbor

“The loved ones are now gone.” He said then mantled in silence.

His sore dry throat was barren, watered only by his salty tears. The deafening silence that dwelled within the ships and boats scarred him. He wished to hear a single sound or a farewell between this blue sky and the sea that stretched into infinity.

In a weeping voice he called for the masts, his voice embraced the wounded skies and echoed the names of the ships’ owners.

“Way hay and up she rises!”

He threw his sight and hopes at the horizon waiting for an answer, but none returned his call.

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She looked in the mirror. Exquisite and breathtaking jewelry sprawled before her, so many that they looked like an octopus in a fisherman’s net.

“A wild cat you are, my love.” He said with a smile, “I shall teach you quietness and tolerance.’ He added as he wrapped her neck with a new necklace, and kissed her cold and bloodless lips.

How can she explain the secret behind her quietness, which is the only thing preventing her from setting on his neck and taking his life?

“Thank you, my dear. I am very grateful.” She muttered and lowered her head.

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The harbor has become a swamp for frogs and toads.

The fetid stench of mold veils the air. It vanishes at times to appear again as the frogs move and their croaks rise.

He turns to the side from which the stench comes.

Many frogs has climbed up the ships and spread scornfully all over them.

One frog has climbed a sail and held a white sheet of paper; he was addressing the crowds and pounding on a dais before him, while the other frogs raised their hands showing respect and obedience, lowering their heads into the mud.

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The features of her face were strange to her eyes. Wrinkles of anxiety infested that tender skin, once fresh and young, but now its colors have withered to wan grey.

“I lack warmth and longing!” She said and moved the mirror testily, then caressed the face of glass as if she wished to penetrate it.

“Spring has started early this year, darling. You know what? I actually have forgotten your real name. It’s just a joke, don’t mind it! I love you to death, you know that.”

“Yes I know, darling.” she replied and pressed her head on the mirror again.

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The harbor appeared before him smaller than a frog’s eye, crowded with frogs, toads, cats, and rats.

“What sorcery has rendered the harbor a home for frogs and rats? It is one weird relation that binds the two species!” The Stanger said, then pressed on aimlessly.

He saw many wondrous things: cats flirting with mice, armies of rats armed with cheese.

Frogs were the de facto rulers, jumping between muddied ships, flaming the moral of guardians and parish.

On the other side, the crocodiles were weeping bitterly.

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The walls are closing in, the tongues of dresses dangle from the coatrack with intended scorn. Everything foretells that escaping this room is impossible. Oh how she wishes she had turned down all the jewelry and money and give him nothing!

With every new necklace, he was closing a door on her, and on each door, there were a thousand locks.

Hundreds of jewelry pieces sprawled before her. She held a handful and burst out laughing.

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“This harbor is a man who has betrayed his lover.” The Stranger said then pulled out the muddied anchor.

He felt like puking when the cats and frogs began dancing and singing.

The rat guards surrounded him suddenly and blocked the way.

“Who are you?” said one of the guards.

“Me… me? I don’t know exactly, I am a stranger!” the Stranger muttered in total shock.

The sky was a black veil, sooted completely by flocks of crows.

At that moment, the stranger wished to see a few white seagulls, or even hear their sound for a moment.

The stranger wrote his well: “No flowers are left for me to pluck, the jasmines have been murdered.”

He lifted the anchor and the crowd moved to surround him, but he quickly learned that the water was nothing but mud. The stranger, speechless, froze in shock, while the rats’ laughter rose high, followed by the laugher of cats and frogs. Still, the crocodiles remained below the ship… weeping.

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When she broke through the first door, winter was already shedding its dress outside, foreboding the end of joy. She took her time picking the last lock, but his shouting voice caught her off-guard behind the second door.

She did not surrender herself like every time. She threw the pearly necklace at his face and ran towards the final door, but her limbs were petrified when she heard his laugher behind her.

She looked back at him. He was holding the door keys, waving them in her face in a full display of mockery.

The Despot

The chamberlain approached the supreme sage.

The latter was seated silently on his jeweled throne with all sorts of food and fruits sprawled before him.

“Master, I bring you today’s news report.” The chamberlain whispered and handed over the report.

The Despot grabbed the scroll and read out loud:

“The Despot has stolen our peace and brought us nothing but pain, starvation, taxes, raised prices, and diminished crops, yields, and sales. This is a curse from heaven, called *The Despot*. Take him down! For when he enters a city, he brings along poverty, and ruins its money with his harlotry…’

Boiling with anger and wrath, the Despot did not finish reading the scroll. He pounced off his seat amuck, and ordered the police chief to summon the council of sages immediately.

The council gathered and the Despot stood amongst them.

“Who published this piece about me?” He shouted while pointing to the report.

“It’s the poet, your highness. The city’s poet and orator.” The minister of media replied.

“And who delivered the speech to the public?”

“The pigeons and women of the city.” The Despot added.

Signs of anger and wrath burned on the face of the Despot as the ministry went on with his explanation.

- “Bring me the poet, you fools.” The Despot yelled like a wrathful dragon and pointed at the police chief who turtled with fear before him.

The chief guard rushed to arrest the poet leaving behind the sages in an uproar.

Within an hour, the poet was brought before the Despot, cuffed, beaten, and soaked in his blood. The sages prayed this scene will end peacefully.

“Cut the head of this heretic!” The Despot cried while waving his fist in the air. “Issue a decree to kill all the pigeons in the city.” He added

The court sorcerer was deflagrating fire at the corner of the hall.

“And forbid women from speaking ever again.” He muttered addressing the flames, then turned towards the council of sages.

The Despot heard the words of the court sorcerer and issued his orders to cut the tongues of all women of the city.

The drums of war howled through the city heralding a war against pigeons, city orators, and poets; a war to cut the tongues of women and muzzle the mouths of men.

Pigeons flew afar from the city and arrows could not stop them from spreading news. Not a single one of the Despot’s guards were able to hunt them down. The pigeons were only landing to feed on wheat then fly again, circling houses and denouncing the decrees of the Despot.

“Burn the wheat so the pigeons die.” the court sorcerer commanded.

And the pigeons died indeed.

The city boiled in oppression, mourning its stolen freedom.

No wheat in the country, no pigeons, and no hope.

The Final Woe

“What shall we do with all these woes?? The minister mocked.

“Should we grind them into flour and bake them into bread? Or should we bestow them on our grandsons on Independence Day?” He added while gazing at a pile of arrows before him.

The minister switched his sight to the chief guard of the fortress whom couldn’t stand the minister’s sharp gaze and averted his eyes.

“Answer me! Should we weave these woes into dresses to cover our shameful bodies and protect us against heat and cold?”

Neither the chief guard nor anyone else moved a muscle.

Silence then governed upon the table where ten guards and a minister were seated.

“This woe is dear to me,” The minister said while brushing through the handful of arrows on the table, “I will never let go of it.” He added as he puts one of the arrows aside.

The locust of war was blocking the horizon, burning the photos of trees and gorging upon its green, seeping into the waters of clouds and imprisoning the rain.

The minister felt his pulse fading whenever he moved an arrow of woe with his fingers.

“Do you remember this one, commander? It is rather delicious. It still tickles my feelings’” The minister added and broke an arrow testily.

A year has gone by and things are still the same. Every day the fortress suffers a new defeat, and with every new one, the chief guardian does nothing, but bury his wounds and cover his shame. A whole year with all its awe has passed by carrying hundreds of unforgivable sins.

“Woes scar, my lord! Look!” The chief guardian said and revealed his marred back.

“Do you not forgive?” He asked.

“Forgive? How can I forgive he who has betrayed his country? You have surrendered our neck to the enemy. We have become nothing but a meek prey, easy and weak. Look outside, you fool!”

“Your words are heavy, my lord! I… I am but a slave of the ruler. These woes are not of my making, I despise them.”

“The truth is that you cannot live without them! You and your ruler have become addicted to sins and corruptions, until you became the woe itself.” the minister said and rapidly broke another arrow.

“My lord, you are insulting the ruler, this is an unforgivable crime!”

Whenever the minister broke an arrow, the eyes of the chief widened. They jumped between the minister and the rest of the guards whom hid their hands under the table, and clutched their swords.

“I see your swords are plotting yet another crime. Did your ruler order you to kill me? How naïve! I have died a long time ago when our forsaken dignity was lost.”

“We tried to defend the fortress and you know it, but our resources are no longer enough.”

“What is home, chief guard? Is it a bag that you carry on your shoulders whenever you please, just so you can elude under the wing of night like a thief who’ve sold his land?

“It is agreements and conventions.”

“Indeed it is! Woes and defeats, a woe after another, until you broke the might of this fortress and left it an easy prize for the enemy.”

The minister sprawled the arrows over the table and grabbed one, the guards rose up and unsheathed their swards, while the chief guardian ambled towards the door with a smile as he waved for the guards to finish the job.

The minister broke an arrow with his hand, and a guard yelled:

“The fortress has fallen! The fortress has fallen!

Disintegration

There were four around him.

“Marmash” was his loyal dog that slays his enemies and plots conspiracies against his haters.

“Wattah” was his watchful eye that spies on all those who seek power.

“Maddad” was his official spokesman and personal media man who forges facts and corrupts hearts and minds.

And finally “Terkey” the sage and wise consultant, the mastermind behind all plans; plans to conquer the water shares and the cattle of those who fail to repay their debt.

Four men of unknown parentage whom he elected from outside the tribe and took under his wing.

They are his obedient shadows. They care for and watch over his money and properties, and share in his journey of corruption and tyranny over the poor and armless residents of the desert.

They are only four! The sheikh has never changed them throughout these lean years, and they, themselves, did not change as well. In fact, they have grown more loyal since each one of them had had his own separate tent with a white camel and a belle.

The Sheikh knows that the survival of his rule depends on creating conflicts between tribes, breaking up their ties, and destroying trust between spouses and siblings. He knows that wealth is the father of all evils and is a power that creates troubles and deflagrates danger. Therefore, he believes that poverty is the key to subdue all the desert’s residents, and that lack of water and food is his only insurance that they won’t rebel against his “rule” which has lasted for decades.

Terkey says that splintering the tribe is crucial to the disintegration plan. He carries on detailing his tools and methods for the Sheikh and other close members of the council. He uses a dry branch and the desert’s sand to draw a diagram; sometimes he uses a stone or a goat’s stool to personify some unwanted characters, and whenever he plots a disaster against one of these stones, he hits it hard, and its blood drips before the feet of the Sheikh and councilors.

On the other hand, Marmash drools whenever the doom of a stone or the numerous “stools” grows near, so he gasps and dangles his tongue as soon as the Sheikh orders him around, and basks in the

death of any individual or in any disaster that befalls the desert's residents or their cattle.

Marmash used to sneak between the tents at night, masked like a poisonous dart, killing silently, planting evidence of conflict, and enticing the brutality of revenge.

"Wattah" narrates the aftermath of a claimed treason between cousins and brothers. He prepares everything carefully, follows the actions of every party before releasing the news, and does not forget to add an additional details just to deflagrate everything. He wickedly and vigorously weaves a story of an almost-lost honor that was defended by a brother sleeping in the open air who gave up his life to protect the tribe's honor and women.

"Maddad" spreads through the desert breeze and the sand's flames the news of an alleged heroism and a treacherous murder. He entices the feelings of the victim's family and arms them with weapons and evidence that condemns the murderer. He then offers to expel the family of the murderer from their home; a generous offer from the benevolent Sheikh who saves the situation and preserves honor.

And so "The Arabs are divided into two" and the disintegration begins!

Four!

The Sheik leans on them like a cane. He feeds them lies and waters them with wickedness and filth, for he knows them well, and they succeed in every plot and hunt.

He sits rich, awed, and powerful, surrounded by many coffee dallahs[1].

Guarded by 4 deaf shadows, the burning desert, and the derelict tents abandoned by their owners with a hope to return one day!

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[1] Traditional Arabic coffee pot

Empty Bottles

The sky unfolded its brails in his face and blocked his vision.

“What’s the time?” he asks himself, thinks for a moment, then replies: “I do not know!”

He writes a few meaningless letters on a random sheet of paper, he sinks his head, then pulls it up, looks right, then left and finally drops the paper and himself as well.

His legs stretch ahead, his hands above his head, while his fingers play with a lit cigarette, in such a way where the cigarette does not burn him but burns itself instead, meanwhile, his eyes shines like ores of glass.

Yesterday he died for a couple of hours.

“We were confused because he had no pulse for a couple of hours though he was responding to our calls.” The doctor told me.

When he woke up, he did not mind the doctors and simply stood up, took out a cigarette, then demanded to see Salma! He looked at me and said: ‘Bring me Salma!’

It was 3 am, where could I possibly find Salma?

He stayed silent and looked up at the roof rapidly, paged through the papers more than once as if he was searching for a lost word, he examined the lines, then lifted his face.

“Haven’t you brought Salma yet?” he yelled.

The more he smiles, the paler his face gets, and his jaw bones stretch to mix with his smile.

“Empty bottles teach robbery!” He laughed harder and harder in the face of my confusion as I tried to work out the relation between empty bottles and robbery.

“Do not mind what I’ve just said. There is no relation whatsoever between empty bottles and robbery.” this time he even laughed harder.

The white blankets that cover him highlight how pale and yellow his face looks, drawing a painting of a wheat field that has not been fully harvested yet.

“You know what! Words that escape the clutches of my pen, because of my fear of arrest, bite me back in the form of an old pain between my shoulders, precisely here!” He turns his back and places his hand between his shoulders.

“How many righteous words have I failed to write because I feared the sound of boots in the night?”

“They used to come to me before Dawn’s prayer, like they never sleep at all. I wake up before they arrive and lean my head against the wall, so they lose all pleasure once they realize I am awake.”

He rises from his bed and stands next to the window that overlooked the backyard of the hospital.

The scene was of rocks covered by sands.

Old, neglected, and rust-infested machinery that look like weary people resting near the rocks.

He lights yet another cigarette and strikes his white beard.

He broods for a while then points at the rocks and machines:

“I wonder from what tribe they descend? Their looks suggest they come from unknown tribes”. He laughs intermittently, “Do you think they will stay for long?” he adds.

Just then I got a cold chill in my spin, and truly felt that I will lose my mind soon, so I stood up and looked out the window to where he pointed, but there was nothing outside but rusty junk.

He opens the drawer, takes out a pile of papers, throws them at the ceiling and swings his hand reaching up for the sprawling papers around the room as if he’s worshipping.

“Pigeons fly, pigeons alight, pigeons disappears, but will the pigeons die?”

Papers fall all around, he flirts with them like flocks of pigeons that are only visible to his eyes. He approaches each paper carefully, then looks at me in a flash.

“Don’t you have anything to feed these poor pigeons, some wheat, O buddy?”

He holds a paper and embraces it as if he’s hugging his lover.

“When the bottle is empty, it marks the end of the night. This is a sign of dying and the end of a short-lived mayhem, a song that helps you shed some of your daily burdens, but you just do not find it funny”.

He throws a paper outside the window and waves at her like he is freeing a bird, before blowing his last kisses to it.

“Are you even listening?” He asks.

“A near empty bottle and a drunk friend seated before you, telling you about a lost lover with the features of an orange, eyes of a coconut, and the smell of pineapple.”

What a *fruity* lover!

The place has a dreamy cat staring at you with wilting eyes. It appears as if it wishes to turn into a hoopoe or a seagull so it can know the secret behind the wall.

“It’s an empty bottle, my friend.” He says, “You see yourself through it, hollow and surrounded completely by colorless glass, but they are on the inside. A narrow nozzle suffocates your breaths with a fragile base that might survive or break apart”.

“Break apart? Did you say anything about breaking apart?”

I felt dizzy and distrait. I could no longer follow his questions and movements. I clung to his shadow that mixes up with the mirrors around me so it disappears as soon as you look at it.

The unknown tribes are still at the same place, and the body of the sun is still bleeding in the heart of the sky.

Glass surrounded me all around, reflecting the image of only one person in the room, a person with a long white beard, surrounded by piles of paper.

Pigeons fly over my head and only lands to become scribbles over the white paper.

Salma has not arrived yet and my pulse is battling death.

Nothing before the mirror but the reflection of my face and a few empty bottles.



The Wolf Never Dies

He bared his teeth, so the shepherd escaped leaving the flock defenseless.

He gazed at the flock, installing terror into the scattered skinny sheep that are awaiting the death of one of them.

The scene tempted the wolf. He considered hunting more than one sheep this time. However, he recalled his covenant with the big “Ram” that “The wolf never dies and the sheep never perish[2]’, so he scrapped the idea then lunged and kidnapped one weak sheep, tearing the mayhem of silence and ending the night with a worthy hunt.

In great difficulty, the wolf dragged the bleeding sheep before the eyes of the ‘Ram’ smiling at him when their eyes crossed, a sign of keeping an old covenant, one that has lasted for many long years in which the wolf kept on hunting one sheep only with the Ram’s blessing. The convent has been kept a secret from the other sheep, because the death of one sheep guarantees the survival of the Ram and the flock as well.

The wolf arrived at his den jaded and infested with fever. He hunted down the weakest sheep in the flock that night, nonetheless running worn him down, he’s out of breath, and had feeling mixed sensations of boredom and fear.

“What is this? Is the wolf scared?” he said before expelling the idea from his head.

However, as he let his bloody prey fall on the ground, one of his bloody teeth fell down alongside it; a sight that reawakened his concerns. Yes, the wolf is old, and this hunting game is not as fun as it used to be. Many times did he leave his victim drowning in its own blood, a pretty late feast for eagles, but that has become a thing of the past.

“The wolf is not the same anymore” the Ram thought to himself. “I swear that sweat was drowning his old face and his muscles could barely hold the smallest sheep I have in the flock. Is it time already? Can the wolf die?”

The Ram planned to carry out his plot with the onset of spring.

He bleated at the flock announcing a white revolution to end the dictatorship of the wolf and dispose of the heavy burden of a covenant that he had benefited from for so long, but was no longer valid since the wolf had become weak and old.

The flock followed the Ram towards the mountain of the wolf.

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[2] A local proverb

During the march, the Ram could feel the sheep transforming into wolves with every step towards the den. The bleating was starting to sound more like howling, and their wool was transforming into thick fur.

The Ram could not understand the deep sadness that overwhelmed him when the sheep set on the old wolf.

Tears broke their way out of his eyes while witnessing the brutality that ended the life of the wolf and left him a sad mutilated cadaver.

The sheep were cursed. They turned against each and their innocence turned into horrifying scenes of murder.

He opened his eyes and gazed at them again, and so he realized that the “wolf” is yet to die, as hundreds of wolves surrounded him completely.

The wolf did not die.

Only the sheep perished.

Land of Ravens

Alone he stood before the eyes.

All the doubts that surrounded him froze his heart.

He surrendered his pale face to the western wind, caressed the void, and wished no one could see him.

When they saw him, he was ornamented with black breathtaking feathers that covered him like a new silky sweater. He met their gaze once again so he unfolded his wings and rose to the sky disregarding their scattered lines.

Silence loomed its shadows and the wind changed its game. He cawed over the bough of his tree breaking the glass of silence.

“What are you planning to do, Raven? Isn’t all this destruction and plague you brought upon this land enough?” Their elder said with his spaced teeth and a scarred face like a neglected field.

The words of the elder broke the Raven’s silence:

“In the seed lies death. It’s the spell of your hate, void hearts, and hungry eyes. Look into yourselves! These lands are disintegrated by the hands of its own people, I am but a passing bird, a goodwill ambassador, so leave me be!”

Everybody knew that the raven is scheming; his conclusive tone exposed his inner grudge and veiled a poison that was soon be revealed.

They listened heedfully and placed their ears on the wall of mirage, in response, the city revealed pleas of children, women, and old men whipped with oppression. These people had lost their homes to corruption and were doomed to escape to the unknown.

They all looked at him, but he disappeared between the clouds of dust and only one lost feather remained, an omen of the onset of discord and a call for an urgent meeting.

“We expel the raven and destroy his nest and reign, then we wage war’. One man said with his belly dangling before him like an empty barrel.

“Huh, but we have made an oath and signed a contract, can’t you remember?” another said with a sigh.

“We write a sternly-worded letter in which we condemn his acts and deplore his crimes.”

“We await salvation.”

“We ask the public and listen to their opinions.”

“We organize a hunger strike and march in a mass protest.”

Decisions and judgments were rising and sinking like waves. They were divided into groups just as the raven foresaw. The disagreement soon led into a fight as shoes and other light objects became weapons of choice, and by the end of the meeting they all agreed to: “condemn the awful countless acts of the raven and build a sizable luxurious mourning tent in which to receive condolences for the pure souls of this nation’s martyrs.”

The Raven soared above them.

They looked up at the jet-black sky and saw no blue nor star nor cloud.

Nothing but ravens in the sky, cowing and announcing the establishment of a new state.

Grain of Wheat

“It hardly rained that year. Poverty and hunger infested the land foreshadowing lean years to come” said Shihan before smiling at the south gust with weary eyes.

“We harvest the wheat then stack it on threshing lands.” He added, “We winnow the wheat and receive the grains. My father, mother, siblings, and I, we all know the importance of a grain of wheat, thus we handle it gently and we save it in havens away from the covetous. We don’t waste a single grain, nor do we tire until we have collected them all in a big bag.”

Suddenly, Shihan bursts into laughter. I do not know what’s going on in his mind. He mutters some words about loving home, about Amman, Husban, Mafraq, and Karak, then his yearning drags him to Madaba’s soil and the smell of Lavender in Jal’ad, Salt, and Ajloun.

A frown draws itself on his face when he talks about the corrupted. He then accuses them of stealing the resources of our country and selling its yield, before mentioning his father grasping the scythe at harvest time.

“Ants built a village beside the threshing lands, marching like soldiers, invading the womb of earth, and queueing around grains

scattered in small heaps. Each ant picked up one grain of wheat then headed back home.

One by one, the grains disappeared, as I watched with peaking wrath.

My father was keen to collect all grains, but he overlooked the ant's continuous looting although I always brought up the matter.

"Ants are stealing our harvest, O father! Behold, the entire season is lost to their spoiled mouths."

Shehan pointed at an ant carrying a grain and running away.

"Let them be!" his father said after a hearty laugh, "Let ants have their share, there is no cause for fear. They take only one grain, that's all they can carry."

However, these words did not convince Shehan, and with every stolen grain he grew more wrathful.

"Soon after, we started watching out for the ants, trying not to step on them. We would jump away and stumble, my father had even banned me from entering the field, and because of that we ended up neglected the harvest."

The ant's town grew larger and larger, and they started reaching the bags of wheat, then the swarms sat on the barley and covered the entire yield.

Many times we looked at my father's eyes in a silent plea to save the yield, but he always repeated the same old thing:

"Let the ants take their share!"

"We woke up early one morning looking forward to grinding the grains" Shehan said with a drooling mouth, "we were filled with ecstasy and a craving for a warm fresh loaf of bread, yet our hearts froze when we saw the threshing land wiped clean and the bags empty. The swarms of ants no longer carried single grains, they were gnawing whole spikes of wheat now."

A Cloud

In his computer's cloud he wrote: "Our freedoms are violated and our thoughts are stolen in broad daylight."

But his computer screen malfunctioned, projecting white and black strips for a moment, blocking the words he typed, before going back to normal again.

He took a sigh of relief and carried on.

"Mouths are muzzled by force marking the end of the age of freedom."

This time the letters vanished from the screen for a minute then appeared back but sprawled like the entrails of a road-killed bird!

His inability to finish his article sent a fever coursing through his body. He fixed the keyboard in anger and wrote: “Blocking the eye, ear, and heart is a violation to our dignity, and I refer here to the acts of the govern…”

The screen shrank and the entire line disappeared.

He jumped out of his seat and tried to press the start button many times, but the screen remained dim like a long winter night.

‘Dear citizen,” said a husky voice coming out from the computer, “you have exceeded your limit of freedom, therefore your freedom will be blocked for 5 minutes. We hope such incidents do not reoccur in the future, and advise you to comply with Publications Act No. 48 & 94.”

He muttered under his breath complaining about this ban, cursing this act in his heart.

‘Dear citizen,” the husky voice exclaimed again, “we can hear you! There is no need to grumble. We work with your best interest at heart.”

He touched his body searchingly, held his lips with his fingers, “Did I say that out loud accidently? Is it possible that they can read my thoughts?” he wondered.

“Yes, we can, and very clearly’. The husky voice responded, harassing him once again.

He tried to trick the publication officer by thinking of many things at the same time.

He thought of silly and insignificant things, like the water tap that keeps leaking no matter how tight he closes it, a chess board with all pawns splattered on the battlefield with none able to stand up again, an old puppet with ripped off clothes, an eraser bitten from the middle but still usable, a pair of cheap scissors on an untouched wedding dress.

He thought and thought and let his imagination run wild until he calmed down.

“According to article 10 of the Thought and Opinions Act, you are not allowed to think of more than one subject at the same time.” The sergeant said in a serious tone.

The ban period is now over.

He smiled secretly and returned to his laptop. He reached for his mouse and started browsing a site with many different photos, when the husky voice blocked a photo of a girl showing the tip of her hand.

“What’s next? What’s wrong with this picture?’ he said to himself.

“The picture you wish to see is considered level 6 pornographic content according to Pornographic Sites Act No. 16/2012.”

He swallowed his frustration and continued browsing the photos. Soon he noticed that all the photos on the website were mutilated in a funny way, as the officer censored so many parts of them that they started to look somewhat cartoonish.

He commented on a published article with shivering letters: “Red freedom lies behind a door knocked by bloody hands”. With that, he rested his finger on the keyboard basking in the ecstasy of his victory, but the husky voice did not allow him to fully enjoy the moment.

“You have gone over the limit this time, exceeding the ceiling of your freedom. Our delegate will arrive at your door in ten minutes. We advise you to bed your loved ones farewell.” The voice growled disturbing his virtual cloud.

He looked around slowly, as a sensation of peace took over his body; a sensation he never knew before. The sky was blue, clear, and cloudless, so he laid his burdened body on his virtual cloud and slipped into a nap.

Seja[3]

A shot of a child, barely 5 years old, shepherding a trip of goats and sitting atop a boulder.

Fiery eyes, shaggy hair, shoeless feet, and a face that speaks of cunning and wits.

Around him sit a number of kids that don't look much different than him.

Right there, the camera is focused on one of the kids in a way that shows a goofy look on his face, then moves to the square drawn in the middle.

"Your turn, go!" the cunning kid said, and with a smart move, he pokes one of the stones with his finger.

The goofy kid moves a stone, and the remaining kids announce the end of the game, and declare the cunning kid victorious.

"You're a cheater!" The goofy kid says then starts to cry.

"The winner gets the leblebi[4] bag. A bet is a bet!" the cunning kid growls as he snatches a bag from the goofy kid's hand.

The camera follows the faces of the children one after the other. They all seem disappointed that their stupid friend has lost, and they withdraw grumbling from the playground, leaving the cunning child alone, swearing that they will get back at him and bring down his de facto rule if he continues to "make fools of them".

The cunning child rolls a few peas of leblebi on the ground before the other children, as the camera zooms in on the leblebi peas scattering on the ground and the children's hungry eyes watching closely.

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[3] Sija is a chess-like game that uses sticks and stones, popular in the Middle East and North Africa.

[4] Leblebi is a snack made from roasted chickpeas, common and popular in Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Greece, and Turkey

A great silence reigns on the scene, interrupted only by the bleating of a kid goat, as one child jumps at the leblebi peas on the ground.

The cunning kid does it again and throws another handful of leblebi towards the other children. Some of them hesitate, but they all eventually yield to the temptation of the delicious leblebi.

The camera tilts up slowly, showing for the first time a mighty buck standing tall on a hill with an entire trip of goats scattered around him, grazing and paying little attention to the details of the ongoing game.

Meanwhile, the kids are scattered around a small square on the ground and a cunning kid, with fiery eyes, holding a full bag of grains.

An Opportunity

Round and round, the wheels of the small bus cruise on the narrow road, leaning on it while carrying the burden of its weary passengers, mummified atop its seats.

Another round! The city is still sleepy after a long December night.

The bus stops sporadically to spit out a passenger and swallow another.

“Blessed Friday, everybody!” said a passenger, but nobody was listening. All passengers were absentminded, gazing into nothingness just to kill the time.

Some guy sat beside me and unfolded his newspaper, and with every page he flipped, he blocked my vision with it.

I thrashed him with a harsh gaze, so he apologized and complained that the news are the same in every page, and that the government’s denial about raising prices forebodes an inevitable disaster.

“Immigration to Canada is now possible!” He read out loud, “Oh boy, visas for the skilled workers! Seize the chance! I wish an opportunity like this comes at least once in a life time, an opportunity to escape to the land of freedom where people are respected.”

He folded the sprawling papers of his newspaper, grabbed his stuff, and stood up to leave, but he remembered something and came back to his seat right next to me, and pulled up a small cage from under the seat.

The bus stopped.

He circled around himself in confusion, then decided to wait for the next stop. However, he could not find a seat this time, so he stood in front of me carrying his newspaper in one hand and the cage in the other. The cage had a bold bird, with very few feathers covering his small body, as it stood still, unfazed by what’s happening around it.

“This is a canary. It chirps beautifully, I brought it today to entertain my kids” the man said as he held the cage up and smiled.

I didn’t mind him and kept staring at the bird in its cage, when suddenly, the man put the newspaper down, reached for the bird, and grabbed it out of the cage in one clutch.

I let out a sigh of relief and reckoned he will set the bird to the wind, but he laughed out loud and returned the bird to its cage once again.

“Won’t you release the bird?” I said while pushing back an intense urge to vomit.

“But it cannot fly!” He said with a straight face, without even looking back at me, “I have plucked his feathers and tail.”

Round and round, the bus wheels thrashed the long road disregarding the rain that was pelting down mournfully on the glass, or the howl of the wind foreboding a coming storm. Clouds outside, black abscesses covering the face of the sky, leaving little room for any blue spots.

On the other side, a flock of migratory birds seized the opportunity and decided to leave.

The Coop

When the roaster disappeared, the hens let out sighs of relief.

A hen hopped over a pile of grains that used to belong to the roaster and tumbled it down causing a huge mess. Another hen messed up his nest with overwhelming happiness, while the others clucked the news of his disappearance.

The disappearance of the roaster took everyone by surprise.

At first, the hens did not believe the news, and a rumor broke that a fox has kidnapped him on noontide.

“Is it possible? The reign of the roaster is really over?” A naughty hen wondered.

“Actually he fell to the jaws of a little fox and in suspicious circumstances.” Another added with a cheeky grin.

“I wish I could see the expression on his face while he’s running away from the fox, scared and shaking.” Another said lunching a giggle all around the coop.

The reign of the roaster lasted for many years during which the hens used to sleep at the roaster's command and wake up early by his call.

No hen ever dared to disobey him or disregard his strict instructions. One look from him was enough to silence everyone in the coop, before he mounts his throne and lunches his crowing like a Greek king, spreading his colorful feathers, and wearing his comb as a crown in front the other roasters.

The hen's joy infected the others roasters, one even suggested to "set up a barbeque party to celebrate the death of the Greek", another suggested to party all day and night long and for a whole year.

However, one roaster hailed the Greek king and praised him, naming him "the father" that will live forever, while accusing many roasters of conspiring with the fox.

This speech struck everyone like a bolt. A group of wise roasters attempted to contain the situation and resolve any issues, but a conflict between two roasters waged an unexpected war.

A number of roasters joined the loyalist roaster and announced defection, while another team packed up and publishing its first announcement as an opposition force against whom they called the 'thugs of the regime" and declared a white revolution until victory.

Clamor infested the place, wheat scattered all around and mixed with water, eggs rolled and broke causing total chaos, feathers stained with innocent blood and headless corpses covered ground.

Dusk colored the coop in an orange hue, but the parties to the conflict did not mind the new color as it spread further and grew darker with every new droplet of blood.

Dark and deep orange for everyone to see.

Soon, they were out-of-breath, weary, featherless, and speechless, their thin necks dangled in front of them.

Their eyes turned to the coop's door, shocked at the sight of a silent orange fox standing there, greeting them with a sly grin and an empty stomach.

The Donkey Rises

The donkey was the perfect symbol for his upcoming election campaign.

He spend the entire weekend picking this crazy symbol as if he was picking the name of his newborn. He talked to every single person in the village and asked them to suggest a symbol for the

campaign, but none of the suggested names sounded right to him: a moon, star, chicken, key, or pipe, nothing was good enough.

The donkey was his favorite and the closest to his heart, and since he has years of experience under his belt working with donkeys and managing their affairs, he decided to choose them as the symbol of his campaign, and announce his decision in an emergency meeting with his electoral block. He even went as far as to include a picture of a donkey in all of his election campaigns, posters, and televised interviews.

His enemies were shocked when he was released from prison via a general pardon, but the real surprise for all the villages in the area was learning that all charges against him were dropped. Money laundering, illicit enrichment, and abuse of public office, all of these charges melted away by a judge’s decision.

Following his release, he became as patient as a helpless donkey, so why not make it his symbol now?

Even people who were closest to him ended up abandoning him.

The first thing he wanted to do after retrieving his freedom was to pluck out their eyes and steal their money, but his patience did pay off. He planned carefully and then decided to run for elections and win.

His election block was comprised of 15 people whom he selected carefully. They were all barely educated and lacking in experience and competencies. In fact, some of them were ex-prisoners and major felons. It was even rumored that one particular members suffers from chronic mental illness.

the villagers used to criticize him in the morning and accuse him of using political money in his campaign, but comes evening, they all would sneak into his crowded campaign base, and towards the end of the night, they would enjoy the feast he offers them every day, before praying for his success and victory.

However, on January 24th, their hearts learned the true meaning of shock and terror, when loud ululations were heard from the mayor’s house, accompanied by waves of intense gunfire announcing that he has won the election and joined the 17th parliament.

They rushed to his campaign base to congratulate him, and waited for many hours, but he never showed up.

They found nothing but the picture of the donkey raised up high, patient and smiling.